# Tribal and Indentured Migrants In Colonial India: Modes of Recruitment and Forms of Incorporation

*SOAS Studies on South Asia*

# Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India

*edited by*

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DELHI
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS
1993

Chapter 6

## TRIBAL AND INDENTURED MIGRANTS IN COLONIAL INDIA: MODES OF RECRUITMENT AND FORMS OF INCORPORATION

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Humanitarians, merchants and administrators once quarrelled over the rationale and meaning of the nineteenth-century Indian diaspora; today historians have taken their place. Recent studies have shown that, despite the increasing sophistication of techniques and tools of analysis, the pattern and structure of indentured and tribal migration continue to be interpreted divergently and often in an equally stereotypical manner. Assumptions of voluntarism and coercion divide current assessments of recruitment patterns, and treatment of migrants en route to and at their destinations. Whilst some historians have stressed the role of kidnapping and fraud in overseas labour mobilisation, others assume that indentured migration was a 'rational and conscious act' for economically disadvantaged Indians.[2] This latter view is supported by a range of studies which catalogue possible social benefits for disadvantaged groups—particularly women—arising from migration.[3] These revisionist analyses of indentured labour systems

[1] The records of the Government of the Central Provinces of India were consulted in the Madhya Pradesh Central Record Office in Nagpur and in the Central Secretariat in Bhopal, India, by Crispin Bates, and the Records of the Department of Immigration were consulted in Mauritius by Marina Carter. These archives are referred to as MPCRO, BP, and MA respectively. IOR refers to the India Office Records in London, PRO to the British Public Records Office in Kew.

[2] H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (Oxford, 1974); B.V. Lal, 'Approaches to the Study of Indian Indentured Emigration with Special Reference to Fiji', *Journal of Pacific History* xv, 1-2 (1980).

[3] P.C. Emmer, 'The Great Escape: the Migration of Female Indentured Servants from British India to Surinam, 1873-1916' in D. Richardson, *Abolition and its Aftermath: the Historical Context 1790-1916* (London, 1986); R. Reddock, 'Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917', *Economic and Political Weekly* xx, 43, (1985); B.V. Lal, 'Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations', *Indian Economic*

have sought to 'deconstruct' the language of policy-makers and planters, and to rewrite the history of these settlements, but, in trying to reconstruct the migrants as 'actors in their own right', they fall into the trap of individualism, and end by ignoring altogether the economic and political conditions which limited personal initiative.

Taking a rather different approach, quantitative studies of caste, region and other 'bio-data' have led to reappraisals of the individual and collective characteristics of the Indian migrants. This has been particularly true of recent work on indentured migration.[4] These findings have been represented as an important challenge to previous neo-slave models. Evidence of migrants' mobility in India has been translated as evidence of willingness to migrate, and the operation of selectivity principles has been used to demonstrate the 'orderly', even 'respectable' and unslavelike procedures of indentured recruitment. In such works, the pattern of migration is seen to be determined by choice rather than exigence.

However, in both these approaches to the re-writing of the history of migrant labour there are serious flaws to be found. The deconstruction of the language of policy-makers, for example, has not been carried far enough and the voluntarists often end up by reproducing elements of the colonial discourse supportive of migration and incorporation, placing themselves axiomatically in opposition to the objectionists who themselves simply reproduce the comments of contemporary critics. In the elaboration of their hypotheses the revisionists have also ignored important theoretical developments in migration studies. In particular, the role of the colonial state in defining and circumscribing the position and prospects of migrant workers, so crucial a feature of the African literature, is minimised.[5] Most of the quantitative studies outlined above have failed furthermore to investigate the extent to which the demand for labour determines the scale, character and fluctuations of such migrations. Those which emphasise the actions of migrants—propelled by such well known push factors in Indian migration as famine—have also often failed to accord due weight to the fluctuating

*and Social History Review* (hereafter *IESHR*) xxxxii, 1 (1985).

[4] R. Shlomowitz and L. Brennan, 'Mortality and Migrant Labour in Assam, 1865-1921', *IESHR* xxvii, 1, pp.85-110 (March 1990); B.V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: the Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983).

[5] C. Van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia 1900-1933* (London, 1980); J. Crisp, *The Story of an African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners' Struggles, 1870-1980* (London, 1984).



labour demands of employers as determinants of migratory rhythms.

In the case of both inland and overseas migration, the selection of an immigrant workforce in preference to local labour requires special attention. The expressed deficiencies of available labour must be judged alongside the perceived advantages of employing an immigrant work-force. Here again the African literature provides ample examples. Colonial histories are strikingly uniform in depicting indentured migration as a response to severe labour shortage following the abolition of slavery, with freed slaves refusing plantation labour and deserting *en masse* from estates. Evidence is often ignored of the pauperisation of ex-slaves and of planter rationalisation and preference for labour importation, as opposed to wage-bargaining with freed slaves. In many respects indenture—and tribal migration—represented in reality the implementation of a strategy designed to secure cheap and steady labour to suit the production requirements of capitalists.

As an integral part of such a strategy, labour selection was a prerequisite. Age and occupation-specific work-forces are a hallmark of organised migration streams. This did not necessarily rule out family-oriented migration particularly where women could be incorporated into the required work-force. In the case of indenture, however, the elderly and infirm, along with their dependents, were liable to rejection from the estate and even ejection from the colony. Finally, whilst stable and settled communities could emerge from migrant streams, the demographic and economic consequences of migration, producing short term gains for planters and other employers, could also over the long term destabilise both the sending and receiving societies.

The current division of the literature into that which views labour migrations both within India and overseas as fundamentally coercive and that which emphasises the opportunities created from such employment for the economically or socially marginalised, has rendered debate about the modes of recruitment and mechanisms of incorporation of these work-forces theoretically and methodologically sterile. Acceptance of the dangerous and difficult working conditions of migrants should not preclude discussion of forms of recruitment which fall outside the directly exploitative *arkati* and contractor systems, and which emphasise migrants' own recruiting networks and other forms of agency. Similarly, quantitative assessments of health, fertility, savings and other demographic or economic markers of migrants need to be brought into discussions of treatment and levels of exploitation if they are to gain credibility.

*Interpreting colonialist sources: the question of choice*

Contemporary critiques or endorsements of migrant labour systems often served ulterior ends and as they constitute one of the principal sources of both the objectionist and voluntarist arguments, they require careful consideration. The political or economic context of such data is often ignored in an attempt to present material which appears to justify a particular position. Further, in the complex arena of choice and coercion governing individual and collective migrations a multi-layered analysis would be more appropriate. The case of Mst. Singaria, a tribal woman whose migration to Assam resulted in a prosecution of her recruiter, illustrates this point and represents a classic example of a migrant experience which can be read in a number of ways.

In the first place Singaria's story can be seen as a migration undertaken to escape social exploitation or physical coercion at home. She was a Gond woman aged 17, from the village of Nagdon in the Dindori *tahsil* in Mandla.[6] Singaria had been married at the age of 12 to Matadin, the 11-year old son of Tithru 'a respectable malguzar' of the village. The basis of this marriage cannot be known: although the payment of bride-price is common amongst Gonds, in this case the status of Tithru may have required the payment of dowry instead. The fact that Matadin was married again shortly after might suggest that such payment was not forthcoming, that the marriage involved settlement of some other obligation, or that the purpose was merely to effect a local political alliance. At the same time, polygamy is permitted among the Gonds, especially if the first marriage is without issue, and in the records of the court there is no mention of offspring in this instance. The marriage though was arranged and, as is usual, Singaria moved to the home of her new husband. At the age of 12, and assuming no other use was found for her, she would then have been expected to devote herself largely to household chores under the instruction of her mother-in-law. This family she lived with for the next five years before running away to Assam, making the journey in *chet* (March) 1915 in the company of Molin (alias Debia), a licensed recruiter of the Sephinjuri Bheel Tea Company in Sylhet.

Singaria was possibly put in contact with the recruiter by Jharri, one of Molin's relatives, who resided in her locality. To effect her 'escape' Singaria left her father-in-law's home on the pretext of paying a visit to

[6] MPCRO, Comm. & Ind. Dept. (C.I.D.), 1916-34.



her husband's second wife, Manmath, at Dongaria. At the village of Sangrampur about three kilometres from Nagdon, aided by another of Molin's relatives, Kancharia, she met up with Molin and Jharri. According to Kancharia, Molin and Jharri told her that they also were heading to Dongaria, and they and Sangaria then left together. However, they went instead to the Tea District's Labour Association (T.D.L.A.) Recruiting Station at Jabalpur, where Singaria was interviewed by the local agent of the T.D.L.A., a Mr. Mackay. She gave her name as Mst. Dharya, pretending that she was the wife of the recruiter, and reportedly told him:

> Debia Sirdar is my husband. He went to Assam with his mother (Gansoo) two years ago, leaving me with my parents Sadoo and Jania in Majhewali village, *thana* Shahpura, district Mandla. Now my husband has come back to take me up to Sephinjuri Bheel Tea Garden, Sylhet, where he is now working and living, and I am going with him there of my own free will.[7]

Shortly after arriving at Jabalpur, Molin and Singaria left for Assam, where they were indeed married. Singaria's reasons for leaving, as she told her friends on the tea estate, were that her husband used to beat her and tie her to a *charpoy* and, on one occasion, 'tied her to a horse's heels'. In response to questioning she insisted that she had in no way been deceived but had gone of her own free will. The Malguzar of Nagdon made an issue of the case however, presumably because the honour of his family had been offended, and after Molin's return to Mandla a year later to carry out further recruitment, he was arrested and imprisoned on the charge of abducting a minor. In support of this the kotwar of Maholi (where Singaria was born) produced forged evidence, at the malguzar's instigation, showing that the girl was only fourteen at the time of her recruitment—old enough to get married, but technically still under the guardianship of her father-in-law. In the face of this evidence the district magistrate took the side of the malguzar, and sentenced Molin to six month's hard labour. Only after strenuous efforts on the part of the T.D.L.A. agent, and the production of medical evidence proving the girl's majority, was Molin finally released, by which time he had served half of his sentence.

Singaria's story may be used to illustrate the point that migration could be both a conscious choice and yet one which derived from cir-

[7] MPCRO, C.I.D., 1916/9-50, 'Changes in the working of the rules under the Assam Labour Emigration Act'. Letter of complaint from Messrs. Begg, Dunlop & Co., T.D.L.A., 14 February 1916.

cumstances of oppression or deprivation. This type of analysis seems particularly appropriate to women migrants. Whilst women were welcomed on the plantations and mines for their 'dexterity', 'docility' and contribution to 'social stability', the notion of compulsion in female migration is reinforced by what has been termed 'dependency structures within the patriarchal family'. In the Indian context this could work both ways: women could be obliged to remain at home by 'protective' relatives or be pushed into migration.[8] Conversely, women who did migrate were characterised by the Indian authorities as 'common prostitutes...picked up in the streets of Calcutta'. In fact, single women migrants, as data from Mauritius demonstrate, were not necessarily or commonly social outcastes.[9]

*Recruitment, incorporation and the effect of official critiques*

In cases such as that of Singaria and others like her, it is difficult to disentangle social from economic causes of emigration. In central India not only debt, but also the cost of marriage forced many tribals to become bond-servants in central India (known as *bhagia* in Betul, or *saldars* in other parts) for two or three years, and such relationships, once established, were difficult to bring to an end.[10] In Chhattisgarh, for example indebtedness and high out-migration rates were attributed to three factors, 'that is a low standard of living, an absence of work for 7 to 8 months per annum, and the existence of a large body of small cultivators whose holdings are entirely inadequate'.[11] Overseas migrants tended initially to be individuals who were already on the move, having 'fled from their villages from inability to pay their rents'—such as Mootoosawmy, who explained that the produce of his land 'after payment of the kist money to the Circar, proved insufficient for the support and maintenance of my family'.[12]

A substantial cash advance such as that usually offered by an

[8] PP 1859 (31-I), T. Hugon, 'Memorandum on Indian Immigration to Mauritius'. Cases of women migrating in order to escape their husbands, recur periodically in the sources: p.9; for example, Masnoo, who was reported to have eloped from her village in Mandla in 1936, taking her children with her: BP, C.I.D. 1936/11-16.

[9] M. Carter, 'The Family under Indenture: A Mauritian Case Study', *Journal of Mauritian Studies* 4, 1 (1992).

[10] W.V. Grigson, *The Aboriginal Problem in C.P. and Berar*, p.240.

[11] *Royal Commission on Agriculture in India*, Evidence, vol.vi, p.4.

[12] PP 1837-8 lii (180), Woodcock Report, 19 November 1836; Deposition of Mootoosawmy, General Police Office, Madras, 12 August 1842.



Assamese or Mauritian recruiter thus afforded considerable inducement. Linked into migration as an escape from debt-bondage then, was the system of advances. In the 1830s, advances of up to six months' wages, or Rs.30, were forwarded by Mauritian planters—the greater part of this went to cover the costs of the plethora of recruiters and agents who arranged and supervised the migration from village to port.[13] By the early twentieth century recruiters from Assam still received 'advances' ranging from Rs.8 to Rs.16 for every labourer recruited (more in places like Jabalpur, less in Chhattisgarh), only a small portion of which was ever passed on to the labourers. Singaria, for example, received nothing, though Kancharia, who aided in her escape, was given a rupee 'to buy bangles'.[14] By 1919-20 the average advance made to adult recruits in C.P., *including* payments made to defray village debts, amounted to Rs.9 in Raipur, Rs.12 in Bilaspur and Rs.16 in Jabalpur. Reductions in the size of the advances given to the garden sardars had by then reduced the incidence of kidnapping and direct coercion because they had little left, after meeting ordinary expenses, with which to pay for kidnapped or otherwise coerced recruits.[15]

The Singaria case highlights in addition the ambivalent attitude of the local administration, which was required, often reluctantly, to co-

[13] PP 1841 (45), Calcutta Commission of Enquiry Report [CCE], para. 731.

[14] BP, C.I.D., 1922/36-7, 'Public Employment Agencies', a continuation of file no.11-6: 'Migration from Chhattisgarh...'.

[15] *Annual Report on the Working of the Assam Labour Board for 1920.* Each sardar recruited an absolute maximum of 7.8 'souls' (this figure being from Raipur during the famine year of 1918-19) of whom only 4 might be adults. The average in a normal year was usually much lower, a slightly higher proportion being adults: the average number of 'souls' recruited in Raipur in 1919-20 being 4.5, of whom 3.35 were adults; the corresponding figures for Bilaspur being 2.79 and 1.85 and for Jabalpur 3.5 and 2.5 It is likely that garden sardars were therefore handing out a total of less than Rs.30 each year in the form of advances. Even if they were allowed substantially more in reserve with which to carry on their business, it is still unlikely that there were sufficient funds available to finance more than a marginal trade in kidnapping. Looking at the data for the Central Provinces as a whole in 1919-20 we see that 57 garden sardars were prosecuted for offences (compared to 61 in 1918-19) and 366 garden sardars returned to the tea gardens for having committed minor offences against the regulations (compared to 309 in 1918-19). Only one, Dhanmat sardar, was actually prosecuted for kidnapping, an offence he was said to have committed in Raipur and in the Baramba Feudatory State.

operate with the agents and recruiters who controlled the labour trade.[16] The alleged kidnapping of this *adivasi* woman escalated very rapidly into a prosecution both because the *izzat* of a local zamindar in Mandla (the woman's father-in-law) had been wounded and because of the unsympathetic attitude of the local magistrate (described as 'the secret of the whole business' by the T.D.L.A. representative) who was willing to countenance almost any action that would obstruct recruitment for Assam. In this example, at least, the accusation of kidnapping and the reality were divergent. As a consequence of it, however, in 1937 a new law was enacted making it easier for husbands or fathers to prevent women from leaving—female recruits unaccompanied by a husband could henceforth be detained for up to three days before being despatched to Assam so as to give their relatives a chance to 'reclaim' them. Similar practices had already been implemented in the case of overseas migration.[17]

Official resistance to migration outside state boundaries—in Singaria's case in the guise of 'family welfare'—in reality often had an economic motive. Projected labour shortage was an argument used as vociferously by local administrators in India to denounce emigration as by colonial capitalists anxious to import labour. The administration reports of Bastar for 1936-7 spoke of the 'disadvantage' which the durbar suffered because 'Bastar labour is not repatriated into the State, but into the Jeypore estate of Orissa, where they are recruited, and many of them are reported to stay on, taking up land there'.[18] Some officials such as W.V. Grigson and Edward Hyde adopted a hostile stance towards tea garden sardars in an attempt to backpeddle on changes introduced by earlier British advisers, in the interest of conserving traditional society.[19] Others sympathised with a migratory tradition which they took to be a strategy for avoiding debt-bondage. The District Commissioner of Nagpur asserted that in Bastar as elsewhere it was the 'pernicious system of semi-slavery' which drove tribals to

[16] MPCRO, C.I.D. 1913/9-3, A.B. Napier to Sec. to C.C., 2 May 1913; and 1916/6/9-20: 'Note summarising the changes effected in the law relating to the recruitment of labourers for Tea Estates...'.

[17] PP 1875 (c.1115), Royal Commissioner's Report on the Treatment of Indian Immigrants in Mauritius, p.471.

[18] *Report on the Administration of Bastar State for 1936*, p.13 and ibid. 1937, p.13 (Jagdalpur).

[19] BP, C.I.D. 1935/33-11, 'Information supplied to the controller of Emigrant Labour'.



emigrate: 'in the absence of money lenders and rural credit arrangements, migration to Assam is almost the sole means of escape from its clutches'. He contended that the 'operations of the T.D.L.A. in the Jeypore zamindari have been one of the principal factors tending to the abolition of serfdom and begar'.[20] Similar arguments were used by overseas capitalists anxious to recruit among tribals and depressed castes: they stressed the beneficial effects of long-distance migration for the tribals. In the 1830s, pro-indenture spokesmen claimed that a 'superabundance of labour' existed in Bengal which prompted 'hill coolies' to 'wander in search of work not only over all the Bengal provinces, but as far to the northward as Delhi'. They argued that such internal migrants should not be deprived of the 'outlet' which Mauritius provided. In 1856 planters, looking to expand recruitment of tribals, sought to convince Indian officials that the Santhals were 'labouring now under extreme destitution' and that migration could relieve them of the moneylenders 'who have driven them to rebellion and their present abject state of misery'.[21]

It could equally well be argued, however, that recruits from among so-called 'backward peoples' were initially sought-after because it was assumed that they would be unaware of the local opportunities, as well as of the remoteness of Assam or Mauritius. Thus unscrupulous labour contractors were frequently condemned for misrepresenting the nature and place of employment offered to recruits:

> great deception and all sorts of devices are practised by these men to entice men and women away from their homes. They are often put on the railway on the pretence of being given work on the line not far from their home, and are landed at Purulia before they know where they are going, unless the Police happen to discover and rescue them.[22]

Other migrants were led to Raniganj in Chota Nagpur by recruiters on the presumption that they were to be given work in the collieries, only to be shipped off to Assam.[23] In such cases the decision to migrate

[20] BP, C.I.D. 1932/11-1, views on Royal Commission.

[21] PRO Colonial Office [CO] 167/235, Captain Pottinger to Russell, 8 January 1841; IOR L/P&J/1, Vol.86, Emigration: Home correspondence, Guthrie, Chairman Mauritius Association to Labouchere, 10 June 1857.

[22] Superintendent of Police for the Bilaspur district in 1891, MPCRO, General Dept. Compilations 1891-2.

[23] C. Simmons, 'Recruiting and Organising an Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India: the Case of the Coal-mining Industry, c.1880-1939', *IEHSR* xiii, 4, pp.471-3.

was taken not simply in ignorance but on the basis of wilful disinformation. However, the abuses that occurred tended to be specific, rather than general—relating to such matters as wages, comparative pay scales and the nature of the work to be undertaken.[24] Ramdeen, interviewed at Calcutta Town Hall on 10 December 1840, spoke of a voyage made to Mauritius five years previously, with a group of 250 'coolies', 50 of whom were 'dangahs' ('jungle-dwellers'), and who had been told that they were 'engaged to do the Company's work', considering this to mean work for the Indian government. Munnoo Missir, a *bramin* of Gyagee was promised work as an overseer; Mussamat Amirtee and other women were offered work grinding corn locally, but were instead kept in a guarded house as indentured recruits.[25]

Reports of subsequent investigations and raids on houses of principal recruiters or *duffadars* made spectacular reading. When the house of the notorious Bengali head *duffadar*, 'Rampersaud of Bowanipore', was located and broken into, the investigators found: 'a stand of arms in the quadrangle and armed brijabassis patrolling; and round the wall there were small cells, under lock and key, in which the coolies were confined'. At the house of Srikissen *babu*, Sergeant Floyd discovered several *godowns* containing up-country coolies who informed him that they had been kept in a state of close captivity: 'they satisfied the calls of nature attended by a couple of burkendauzes...some of the men were chastised almost daily with strokes from shoes'. In Madras, eighteen emigrants sent a letter to officials complaining that they were kept against their will at the houses of *maistries* to whom they had become indebted.[26]

Tribal migrants from Bastar were discovered in similar conditions in 1923 having been confined by a Dooars recruiter on the pretext of taking them to Assam:

> I visited the place where they were being kept and found, as far as I can recall, about 40 almost naked aboriginals in a very dark room about 20 feet by 14 feet.... The only means of speaking with them was through the man who had recruited them, a professional recruiter of the very worst type, who assured me that they knew where they were going to. As far as I could communicate with them in any way I understood that they thought they were bound for Bhutan—a common expression among villagers for any tea district.... A little while before this incident I discovered a Dooars recruiting agent operating at Pendra road, who while despatching male coolies to labour estates was kidnapping Chamar women and sending them to Punjab.... At other times I have found numbers of undesirable practices going on among the various Dooars recruiting agencies in the Madras hill tracts. Such agencies were generally under the management of half-educated clerks who had no interest in the future of coolies and only looked to their own commission on each migrant.[27]

[24] In some cases, work was simply not available: BP, C.I.D. 1922/11-6.

[25] IOR Bengal Emigration Proceedings [BEP], Vol. 168, Commissioner Allahabad to Secy. Govt. NW Province, 24 July 1871; PP 1841 (427), Grant Minute, Appendix p.45; Deposition, Madras Police Office, 30 September 1842, Madras.

[26] IOR Madras Public Proceedings [MPP], 284/4, letter of 18 emigrants to the emigration agent, Madras, n.d.; CCE Report, paragraph 735; CCE Appendix, Floyd, 3 July 1838.



Yet this account was written by a former supervisor of the Assam Labour Board whose motives were therefore questionable, and the literature is replete with such double edged criticisms—where parties interested in one migratory stream would seek to denounce their competitors, often, as in this case, without adequate knowledge of the Bastari *adivasis* or their language. This is particularly evident for indenture from the 1860s when the opening up of emigration to Réunion, Natal and other colonies increased competition between them. While Mauritian representatives asserted that recruiters acting for West Indian and French colonies stole their recruits with false information, the former complained that the object of the Mauritian envoy Beyts' visit to India 'was entirely antagonistic of the West India emigration interests...nearly all [his] suggestions cover a design...eminently favourable to his constituency and averse to the West India agents'.[28]

Where specific abuses were pinpointed, it could also be with an ulterior motive. What officials of the Central Provinces government most often complained about was the deception of the *adivasis* with regard to wages. Keen to see employment on local projects they insisted time and again, that employment within the province was a far better prospect. Thus the District Commissioner of Chhindwara wrote:

> It is reported to me that there are still complaints of misrepresentation and fraud on the part of the recruiters and that the rates paid in Assam are actually less than can be obtained in the district. There is no lack of employment in a district like this for labourers who desire it. The collieries and manganese mines alone can probably offer all the employment that is required, and the rates of wages that can be earned in them greatly exceeds that paid in the tea

[27] BP, C.I.D., 1922/36-7: Public Employment Agencies.

[28] IOR Indian Public Proceedings [IPP] 188/64, Col. Secy. to Beyts, Jan 1861; MA BIA/1, Beyts Report, 1861; BEP 15/77, Marriott to Secy. Govt. of Bengal, November 1861.

gardens.[29]

Exaggerated wage rates were in fact frequently used as a means to persuade emigrants to migrate overseas. Vitilinga Naiken was told of high wages available in the French colony of Bourbon; Thomas Wise spoke of 'well-dressed chupprassies possessing plenty of money' who persuaded tribals on their seasonal migrations to accompany them.[30]

Where differentials between income which could be obtained locally or from longer-distance migration were not great, it was argued that the activities of recruiters were of prime importance in determining the continued recourse to sources of employment further afield.[31] Thus the Chhattisgarh Commissioner commented that

> recruitment for Assam stands apart from other forms of recruitment.... It is for example entirely different from the seasonal migrations made increasingly from Chhattisgarh to the neighbouring coalfields and steel-works of Bengal and Bihar.... Without a regularly organised intensive recruitment I doubt whether Raipur labour would be induced to migrate to Assam.... There are no indications that a regular connection with this industry has been established, and I find a tendency amongst the people to speak of their relatives and neighbours who have gone to the tea gardens as if they have passed beyond their ken.... The...seasonal movements referred to already...undoubtedly afford a more congenial and natural outlet for the mobile element in local labour.[32]

This may certainly have been the case where the longer-distance migration was not well established, but once a regular flow of labour to and from inter-state and external destinations had been instituted the momentum could more easily be maintained. The fixity of custom and contract in existing labour relations would then override pecuniary considerations. In this context one could cite the instance of the tribals from Rewa who migrated annually to the *haveli* tracts of Jabalpur. Habituated to this seasonal migration to labour on wheat farms in the plains, it was said that should the harvest fail they would turn to begging to pay their way home, rather than seek alternative employment. Similarly, a crucial element in the continuing flow to further destinations was the role of the returned labourer. Bastar administration reports noted revealingly that emigration to Assam had been found

[29] BP, C.I.D., 1922, loc.cit.

[30] IPP 188/46, Secy. Govt. Madras to Beadon, encl. deposition of Naiken, Tanjore, 13 June 1857; CCE Appendix, Wise to Dickens, 19 September 1838.

[31] M. Carter, 'Indian Labour Migration to Mauritius and the Indenture Experience, 1834-74' (D.Phil., Oxford, 1987), especially ch.2.

[32] BP, C.I.D., 1922, loc.cit.



'impossible to prevent'. In spite of a prohibition on such recruitment 'coolies who have returned frequently persuade their fellow villagers to proceed to outside recruiting depots'.[33] Because this did not fit in with official wishes, the role of returnees was viewed with some distaste. Yet, as in the case of some overseas migration, it may be argued that these initiatives represented attempts on the part of migrants to relocate families and kin to new areas outside the structure of government or company recruiting, and to certain tasks in particular farms, mines, industries or plantations which offered more favourable conditions of employment.

The role of such returnees is highly complex, and in most studies has not been fully discussed. In the case of indentured migration, the establishment of migrant networks outside the aegis of government recruitment has been quite generally neglected.[34] The shift in recruitment strategy from locally-based *arkatis* and *duffadars* to returnees thus represented both a need to lower costs and to establish a link of dependency which reached from the village in India to the plantation in Mauritius. Returnees were also brought in to combat and overcome forces hostile to, or obstructive of, colonial emigration. The directly coercive methods—abduction and kidnapping or illegal confinement—characteristic of the early unregulated phase of migration (1834-41) were rendered more problematic by the twin forces of government intervention and local opposition. Hostility to recruiters was a constant complaint of emigration agents during the nineteenth century, and was variously attributed to zamindari or local capitalists' obstruction of recruiters, or to the local population's 'irrational' fear of overseas migration. Returnees, by contrast, could be passed off as examples of persons who had succeeded in the colonies, returning with large sums of money and declaring their preference to re-emigrate rather than to settle in India. Some undoubtedly did play a useful role as disseminators of information regarding the whereabouts of kin or the advantages of a particular location. Some were bona fide return migrants taking their families with them back to Mauritius. Others took advantage of large bounties to recruit labourers and wives of departed migrants in their own interest, sometimes handing them over to rival

[33] *Report on the Administration of Bastar State for 1936*, p.13, and ibid., 1937, p.13 (Jagdalpur).

[34] An attempt to fill this lacuna is made in M. Carter, 'Strategies of Labour Mobilisation in Colonial India: The Recruitment of Indentured Workers for Mauritius', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, 3-4 (April to July 1992).

agencies for a higher commission.[35]

Long-distance migration nonetheless continued to be a riskier affair for the labourer especially when land and property were left behind. Thus F.E.A. Taylor, a settlement officer in Ranchi district reported:

> Aboriginal tenants emigrating to the tea gardens usually leave their lands in charge of their relatives in the villages, but in some cases they go off without making any arrangements at all. When the land is left in charge of relatives they generally respect their trusteeship, and are prepared to hand the land back to the emigrant on his return. Cases are, however, by no means uncommon in which the trustee, even though a relative, has taken advantage of the rightful owner's absence to go to the landlord and get the land settled in his own name on payment of salami.... If the emigrant leaves the village without making any arrangement for the custody of his lands his relatives sometimes constituted themselves trustees, but more often the land is immediately pounced upon by the landlord.[36]

The wisest course sometimes was, if possible, to keep the migration an entirely clandestine affair, thus avoiding the acquisitive interests of others altogether. It is for this reason that shorter distance, seasonal migration was often preferred to a three-year contract in Assam.

Amongst the short-distance destinations for seasonal migrants in the Central Provinces a common resort were the mines of Wardha, Chanda, Chhindwara and (the biggest employer of this sort) Chota Nagpur. Surface workers at these mines were generally recruited from among the local villages, but the underground workers usually had to be sought from further afield—partly, it was said, because it was considered a degrading form of labour. Those recruited for this work were often *adivasis*, the common practice being for them to work underground for one or two months, before going back to their villages to cultivate their crops. In this way, the agrarian responsibilities of recruits could be maintained within the migrant labour system.[37] Labourers thus worked in the mines from January to the end of June, returned by the end of August or the beginning of September, and left for home again at the beginning of November. Recruiters were rewarded by being paid 3 to 4 annas a ton for coal raised by the labourers they brought with them.[38]

The manganese and coal mines of Chhindwara recruited mostly from the neighbouring *adivasi* populations of the Satpuras in the Central Provinces. According to a contractor at Tirodi, who employed a thousand labourers,

> the foreign labour is so called as it is mostly of the Kol or Khol and Chhattisgarhi, Ooriya and Chamar castes—imported into the mining area from Rewah State and surrounding territories and from Chhattisgarh.... The local labour is that engaged from surrounding villages and in a few rare cases from the adjoining districts of Seoni-Bhandara and Nagpur.[39]

Reports from the Manager of the Standard Coal Company and the Chief Engineer of Messrs. Kilburn & Co., both situated in the Jharia coal-field in Chota Nagpur, suggest that recruits from the *adivasi* areas of the Central Provinces, despatched from the rail-station at Bilaspur, were also commonly found amongst the underground workforce at this field. The managers frequently bemoaned their inability to establish a stable workforce; workers tended to come and go as they pleased. This was particularly troublesome when it took several weeks for a 'Bilaspuri' labourer to familiarise himself with the work, and when having done so he then often left. As a consequence Mr Barrowman, the Manager of Standard Coal, railed against what he considered to be the unfair competition for labour caused by the recruiters from Assam.

This was a common theme amongst local capitalists who had earlier criticised the resumption of indenture in the 1840s. Dwarkanath Tagore, an indigo planter, expressed his scepticism before the Calcutta Commission of Enquiry (C.C.E.) about the willingness of tribals to undertake long term emigration. It was no coincidence that Theodore Dickens, another Indian planter, chaired the C.C.E., which condemned the system of indentured migration. The Bombay Committee of Enquiry, set up in 1838, also supported the cessation of overseas migration, bluntly concluding that the presidency could not afford to lose a portion of its labour force to the overseas enterprises. Railway and colliery managers, tea planters and landholders added their voices in

[35] Ibid.
[36] BP, C.I.D., 1935/33-11.
[37] BP, C.I.D., 1920/12-9: Report of the Coalfields Committee, pp.94-5.
[38] Ibid., p.126.

[39] The daily average of those employed at Chhindwara alone, circa 1940, was 11,500, some 3,400 labourers being employed simultaneously in various other mines in the C.P. At times this labour force reached a total of nearly 20,000 and due to the high turnover there may have been in excess of 30,000 employed during the year as a whole: the income derived supporting nearly 100,000 dependents. The majority of these were 'hazree' or daily labourers, often coming and going after a period of work in the mines of only 10-14 days. On average 32 per cent of these labourers in the Chhindwara district were *adivasis* in 1940 (according to a survey of 27 of the mines), although some small mines employed in excess of 50 per cent from among the *adivasi* population.

opposition to the labour mobilisation practices of Mauritian and West Indian recruiters. Landholders' Societies alleged abuses in recruitment and complained of unfair competition in order to convince the authorities of their weightier claims to the services of India's labouring population.[40] The unfavourable reports of committees of enquiry can thus no more be taken at face value than the claims of employers that seasonal labourers enjoyed better conditions of labour than overseas or long-distance migrants.

Recruiting for mine work was in fact obliged to be as active and as structured as that for Assam and the overseas colonies. Competition between capitalists for labour meant that collieries, such as Messrs. Mackinnon; Mackenzie & Co. in Chota Nagpur, employed workers on contract using essentially the same means as the T.D.L.A. and others. The usual system, according to this company's agent at the Bhowra colliery, was 'to go to the villages and tempt the inhabitant with food and money while the contractor with the largest purse scores'. Opposition from the landlords was placated by the payment of money for each labourer taken away from the villages.[41] With competition for labour at such a high level in the Chota Nagpur collieries, C.P. officials were inclined to give in response extraordinarily favourable accounts of the working conditions in the mines of Chhindwara, perhaps because it was a *local* enterprise which brought revenue into the coffers of the Central Provinces government. A case in point is the memorandum from C.A. Clarke, Commissioner of the Nagpur division in 1922:

> I have witnessed the annual migrations of villages from Chhattisgarh and often seen the labourers at work in the manganese mines and the Mohpani coal mine. Apart from the seasonal and migratory character of much of the Indian labour, I would specially emphasise its domesticity. The forms of life being so simple in Indian villages, once the habit of seasonal migration has begun, it is an easy matter to pack up and go. A few bundles and baskets carry all the household goods, and there is no difficulty over leaving the empty house in the village

[40] CCE Report, Evidence Tagore, pp.71-2; Bombay General Proceedings, 347/71 Bombay Committee Report, 20 September 1838; BEP 15/77 Landholders & Commercial Association to Secy. Govt. Bengal, 30 December 1861; L/P&J/1 Vol. 88, Bettington Report, appendix: *Madras Spectator*, 22 October 1842.

[41] The compensation of village elders by payment, in this case in cattle, was also a common practice in Pondoland in southern Africa in the nineteenth century. See W. Beinart, *The Political Economy of Pondoland, 1860-1930* (Cambridge, 1982), ch.2; and S. Marks and A. Atmore, *Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa* (London, 1980), ch.5.



> home till the return. I believe the tendency of moving with all the members of the family, both young and old, is increasing as the facilities of travel have become better understood.... We are all familiar with the happy family character of work on the Indian mines, with the women carrying for the men, the bigger children playing around, and the infants kept in little baskets close by. I went down the Mohpani coal mine several times and my impression is that there were more women than men....[42]

Another report emphasised the importance of family and social considerations which were apparently met by mine-owners: 'both the male and female local labour takes great interest in its own and neighbours' marriages, and in April and May are on the average absent for half a month'. It was asserted that with other absences due to field work, 'the local labour only puts in a clear four and a half to five months work on the Manganese mines' per year, whilst with 'bazaar holidays, festivals and gazetted holidays and the rains,...rarely is more than 36 hours worked on average per week'.[43]

In addition, the 'foreign' labourers on the mines, if these commentaries are to be believed, were given free housing and food at cost prices. Such reports contrast very sharply with the C.P. government's official position on migration outside the province, which it regarded as unnecessary, undesirable and underpaid. This view applied particularly to migration overseas, where quite different economic and moral judgments were made by comparison with those adopted in discussions of indigenous enterprises. These almost mercantilist views may not have been unconnected to the fact that the Central Provinces' government earned some Rs. 560,000 per annum in revenue from auctions, royalties, and fees derived from the mining activities within its boundaries in the late 1930s, more than half this sum from the exploitation of coal alone.[44] By contrast, the income received from the export of labour overseas was indirect (increased trade) and negligible (remittances).

### *The issue of family labour*

In particular, the notion of family labour as the mainstay of local capitalist enterprise stands in marked contrast with harrowing accounts of the sexual jealousy and depravity overseas attributed to the sex dispar-

[42] *Report on Labour in Coal Mines in the CP and Berar* (Nagpur, 1943), pp.12-16, 62, 101; BP C.I.D., 1922/26-62: Opinions on the Indian Mines Bill.

[43] BP, C.I.D., 1922/26-40, DC Nagpur citing evidence, contractor, Tirodi.

[44] *Report on Labour in Coal Mines in the CP and Berar*, p.146.

ity in male-dominated migrant communities. Undeniably, some of the more distant colonies importing Indian labour experienced continuous difficulty in recruiting the requisite quotas of women, but the image of 'coolie wife murders' took on a significance far beyond the numbers involved both in contemporary investigations and on subsequent historical literature. In Mauritius where importations of Indian women prior to government control of the trade in 1842, rarely reached more than five per cent of total immigrants, the government was frequently obliged to answer charges of rampant prostitution and homosexuality on estates. An enquiry of 1846 failed to uncover any evidence of such practices and the hapless residents of the 'coolie lines' not surprisingly rejected all such allegations. The British government nevertheless passed legislation which obliged labour exporters, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, to ship a due proportion of female with male emigrants. As a result, the strategy of sending immigrants back to recruit amongst their own wives and female kin received a boost: returnees were offered a £1 bonus for every woman relative who accompanied them back to Mauritius. In order further to encourage this practice, however, and in response to demands from male immigrants, legislation was passed to secure to them the recognition of their conjugal rights. Ordinance 3 of 1856 punished persons enticing away the lawful wives of Indian emigrants, and with it the restriction of women's freedom of movement outside the authority of male relatives was reinforced at the work-place in Mauritius.

Even when the levels of female immigration had been raised, however, and family or conjugal units had become more common on estates, such concerns continued to be voiced, and have been integrated into the historical literature. Hugh Tinker, for example, has written that the overseers or 'drivers' of Indian origin 'were almost the only estate workers having wives and living a family life'.[45] Many accounts of family life under indenture in fact fail to differentiate between opportu-

[45] CO 167/375 Higginson to Labouchere, 22 April 1856; CO 169/11, Ordinance 3 of 1856; P. Emmer, 'The Importation of British Indians into Surinam 1873-1916', in S. Marks and P. Richardson (eds.), *International Labour Migration: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1983), p.101, 109-110; Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, p.204; and 'Into Servitude: Indian Labour in the Sugar Industry, 1833-1970', in Marks and Richardson, *International Labour Migration*, p.80. M. Swan, in *Gandhi: the South African Experience*, writes, for example, that 'the Natal indentured labour system offered little room for even such basic human comforts as family life' (Johannesburg, 1985), p.25.



nities and conditions at the onset of migration and once it had been established. But it is surely crucial to realise that the manner in which labour was recruited for the Mauritian plantations in the 1830s differed from the strategies for reproduction of the work-force which had been adopted a generation later. Thus, the haphazard methods of agency houses who controlled shipments to the island prior to 1842 were replaced within ten years by a combination of government agents, contractors and returnee-recruiters, who had a new set of objectives in labour selection and collection. Similarly, the social and family networks of Indians, on plantations and in their nearby settlements integrated new arrivals in ways which would not have been possible three decades earlier. Periodicity is thus a crucial factor that all too often is ignored.

*The effects of competition and the problem of discipline*

In assessing the modes of recruitment and incorporation of migrants the duration and establishment of individual migratory streams can be shown to be a crucial but neglected factor in a variety of areas. Where several established migratory routes co-existed, as was the case in many labour-catchment areas from the 1860s, increased competition in recruiting could sometimes enable Indian labourers to exercise more choice as to where he or she was going to sell his or her labour: the booming cotton tracts of Berar and the government irrigation works in Chhattisgarh provided ample and lucrative alternative sources of employment for the migrants of central India, for example. Similarly, the opening up of recruitment to French colonies and others in the 1860s, could provide Mauritian returnees with greater leverage in extracting fees from employers. Migrants could also sometimes take advantage of competing efforts to obtain labour: in 1919-20, five enterprising migrants from Chhattisgarh, took advances at Ranchi and then absconded en route to Assam; they were caught and prosecuted only when they tried to do it a second time. Some administrators reflected that one reason for young tribals to go to the Tea Gardens was in order to 'see the world' and to experience such adventures as a ride in a train. Other migrants actually travelled to several destinations, becoming international couriers of Indian labour. One woman returnee from Mauritius expressed the common notion that migration had broadened her horizons: having spent twelve years in the colony, she returned to India, set up a 'refreshment room' on a migrant route, and scorned those who were afraid to migrate overseas as 'cowards'. It is

unlikely however, that migration ever became a 'rite de passage', as in the case of Pacific islanders.

On the other hand, early migrants to Mauritius, sometimes expressed a sense of bewilderment at the demands of plantation labour, comparing it unfavourably with their experience of agricultural work in India. Parvadee, who had been employed as a coolie in the Nilgiri Hills complained:

> The work was too much for me, and in two months I was unable to continue it. Planting sugar canes is not an easy business as in our country. The canes there are larger than ours and require constant weeding.... They expected us to work without stopping a moment.

The recognition that migration—involving as it did the breaking of caste, commensality and work taboos—could irrevocably defile participants was the over-riding preoccupation of Bibee Jaun, a female returnee who declared: "I have lost my caste: my own mother will not eat out of my hand'. Later migrants, better informed as to the requirements of plantation labour, and better placed to maintain traditional life-styles, could, by contrast, often be integrated into the estates and the settlements around them in less disruptive ways.[46]

Studies of living standards and working conditions on estates fail both to consider this time-factor and to assess the extent to which the organisation of labour was outside the purview of the European planter or official. Thus Chakrabarty makes the point for the Calcutta jute mills that labour discipline and control were largely left to Indian sardars, who in many respects used methods more akin to zamindari *goondas* than to European factory foremen. One Mauritian returnee similarly commented: 'I was only beaten when I did not work'; and the problem of interpreting this statement or attempting to judge it is immediately apparent. As Chakrabarty points out: 'what appeared to the state as corruption, abuse or breaking the rules was precisely the form in which the sardar's authority was manifested. It was an authority that was incompatible with any bourgeois notions of legality, factory codes and service rules.'[47] Migrant workers did not bring with them a culture of

[46] MA RA 1788, Report of Travelling Inspector, Southern Districts, 1865; IOR, *Grierson Report*, Diary, 1882, p.9; CCE Report, appendix, deposition of Bibee Jaun; A. Graves, 'The Nature and Origins of Pacific Islands' Labour Migration to Queensland, 1863-1906' in Marks and Richardson, *International Labour Migration*.

[47] D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal, 1899-1940* (Delhi, 1989), pp.107, 112.



ingrained equality, comparable to that of English industrial workers, but related instead to hierarchical and communal loyalties reinforced by the sardar's caste status and religious position (in Mauritius, *sirdars* were instrumental in the construction of temples from the 1860s). Finding a yardstick with which to measure such concepts is thus a peculiarly difficult task for the historian. Equally, deconstructing the language of enquiries, administrators and planters, necessitates an understanding not only of the political stance of such commentaries but also of the limitations of their socio-cultural perspective.

*Dichotomous interpretations: a problem in colonial discourse*

In conclusion it may be argued that migration and the incorporation of Indian labourers into plantations and industrial centres requires a sophisticated and multi-faceted analysis. Why, therefore, do historians tend to fall into one or other of two opposing interpretations of this phenomenon, that is, either the crude objectionist or voluntarist positions? Clearly ideological factors have a role to play: neo-classicists, for example, seek to demonstrate self-regulatory characteristics in all capitalist or proto-capitalist economies and fall in the process into a liberal, rampantly Eurocentric, style of interpretation. Neo-Marxists, on the other hand, have sought to emphasise that all economic relationships are relationships of power and, in pursuit of this argument, have tended sometimes to exaggerate the hegemonic influence of capitalist political and class structures in colonial societies. Even the openly didactic advocates of such positions, however, have often ended by parodying their own points of view. Why this is so requires some explanation, and in any case one ought to ask why it is that migration studies have become such a rich area of study for the protagonists in such debates.

Gyan Prakash has already provided part of an answer to this question, by examining the free labour/slavery dichotomy and the way this tended to structure consideration of these issues by colonial officials. Their view of the labour question in India and particularly their view of the *kamia* (bonded labourer) in Bihar, which Prakash describes, was thus often couched in terms which served a teleological view of history assuming that slavery must always give way to freedom, and that any system of labour control exercised in the past was likely to be 'unfree' by comparison with that yet to come (especially if modified by the colonial administration). This perhaps goes some way towards explaining the nature of official concern, but it does not in every case account

for the conclusions arrived at, nor their timing, nor the conflicting perspectives of every one of the historians that we have discussed.[48] In the case of migrant and indentured labour, it is important to consider the sources that have been employed. These are usually official accounts or enquiries, which are concerned only with the conditions or circumstances of migrants insofar as they related to the needs of legislation. This demand for legislation arose primarily, as Chakrabarty has argued, from the needs of employers. In the monopolistic conditions pertaining in many industrial and planting concerns in the nineteenth century, there was often little demand for legislation to regulate the conditions of Indian labour (on the model of the British Factory Acts of the 1820s) because of the abundance of labour supplied. This abundance arose, particularly in the north and east of India, from the expropriation of *adivasis* and low-caste groups who are found in a majority among the workforce. In India therefore the administration gave full vent to its natural alliance with the predominantly European employers and completely ignored the conditions of labour. Indian entrepreneurs were also sometimes the beneficiaries of this bias—as in the following example drawn from the C.P. government report on labour in coal mines in C.P. and Berar:

> 'These minors are my future.' It was with this apt epigram, accompanied with an encircling sweep of his arm that Sir Maneckji Dadabhoy pointed out a group of happy, grinning Telegu urchins who had collected round him.... This happened when Sir Maneckji was entertaining a party of guests at one of his collieries and showing them round the labourers' living quarters. This seemingly trivial pleasantry has a deep significance. It demonstrates the quiet confidence with which this great industrialist...expects his labourers to grow old in his service and further anticipates that their progeny shall also work for him when they are of age.[49]

Sir Maneckji was one of the biggest industrial capitalists in the C.P., owning (in partnership with Sir Bissessardas Daga) the Ballarpur Ghugus and Rajur mines in the Wardha valley coal field. He was also the Managing Director of the C.P. Syndicate, which owned the Kalicyhappar mine, and the Managing Agent of the Kanhan Coal Company (owning the Damua mine), and of a mine at Chirimiri in Korea, an *adivasi* feudatory state.

[48] G. Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1990). This path-breaking book has unfortunately yet to have any impact on the field of migration studies.

[49] *Report on Labour in Coal Mines in the C.P. & Berar*, p.108.



The motivation behind such accounts was the desire to demonstrate the lack of any need for legislative control of mining and industrial enterprises within India. As competition increased however, particularly that between the Indian and European capitalists, a growing voice begins to be heard within these documents, making a case, also motivated by the needs of capitalists, for an alternative approach: the intervention of government and the controls required by industry in order to equalise competition. This voice was heard particularly in the 1920s and 1930s but also at other times when declining prices or competition for labour put pressure on profits. The case then needed to be made for legislation, and evidence was sought for a quite contrary interpretation: that all things were bad and there was a need for dramatic reform.

Sometimes both voices might be heard in the same official report. Thus the same enquiry into the C.P. mines from which the above quotation was taken also includes the following observation about the Wardha-valley mines (where Maneckji Dadabhoy's pit was located): 'the majority of the labour is housed in flimsy temporary huts made of bamboos, branches and leaves. These are obviously no protection against either cold or rain, and must be blown away every year by storms.'[50]

Being also advocates of the interventionist approach, the views of the independent C.P. mine-workers' union set up in the 1930s, and also cited, give an equally excoriating and moralistic account, a speaker at Junnordeo in Chhindwara denouncing the management in the following terms:

> The wages of the miners are low, their housing is scandalous, ignorance and disease reign supreme among them, bribery is rampant. There are innumerable deductions from their wages. Even Sunday is a half holiday. The miners are highly indebted. The evils of drink and gambling are deep-rooted. Medical relief is a mere whitewash. Compensation for accidents is more often evaded than granted. The mine worker is a wage slave in a literal sense of the term. Security of service, there is none.[51]

It is possible, however, that neither the standard of accommodation hoped for by some of the commissioners, nor (particularly) the security sought by the C.P. mine workers' union, was actually desired by the *adivasi* labourers who wished to spend as little time at the mine as possible, so that the bulk of their time might be devoted to working their land. It is important to stress however that the views of the labourers

[50] Ibid., p.136.

[51] Ibid., p.150.

themselves were not the concern of the instigators of these accounts. Their primary purpose was either to cover up or to expose deficiencies that might justify the introduction of British-style factory legislation.

For this reason, the legislation and enquiries of the time concerned themselves largely with matters such as accommodation and the provision of latrines—visible features of the mine administration amenable to reform and which helped secure the availability of workers. Safety, training, and conditions underground little concerned them because they little concerned the employers, since it was underground where the more peripatetic elements in the workforce were concentrated. As long as the supply of *adivasi* coal-face workers was constant, safety underground was of marginal importance, particularly since this element amongst the labourers had a rapid rate of turnover. Discipline was also rarely discussed since this was a matter left largely to the recruiting sardars.

The variation in perspectives on migration generally seems to have been equally extreme. The best example of this is given by a District Collector in Jubbulpore in 1872 who made it a personal crusade to obstruct in every manner possible the recruitment of labourers for shipment to Jamaica. A recruiter in the district, Abdul Rasim, was acting perfectly within the law, but his license was suspended by the D.C. on the grounds that he was working on a commission basis rather than a regular salary, a fact which 'offended the spirit if not the letter of the law'. When ordered to restore the recruiter's license he reacted by suspending *all* recruitment within the district, pending the receipt of further information from the Protector of Emigrants regarding the conditions of service in Jamaica—ostensibly so that he could better conduct his interviews of prospective emigrants. At the same time the D.C. railed against the lack of harsher penalties for breaking provisions of the emigration act—penalties which he clearly wished to employ. This persistence ultimately succeeded. Abdul Rasim was eventually discharged by his employers after the controversy had dragged on for nearly a year.[52]

Similar variations in perspective are also to be found in the sources on long-distance and overseas migration in the colonial period. The governments of Bombay, Madras, C.P. and Assam generally opposed the furtherance of overseas emigration, covertly or openly citing labour demand within India as the principal cause of their anxiety. By contrast, the governments of Bengal and N.W.P. encouraged indenture

[52] MPCRO, C.I.D. compilation, 1972, no.45: Emigration and Emigrants.



as a means of coping with 'over-population'. It was, furthermore, amongst capitalists in India who were threatened by overseas recruitment that the most strident criticisms of conditions of labour under indenture were fostered. Once overseas migration had been established in the teeth of such opposition, competition between internal and external employers in the principal labour catchment areas ensured that it was not working conditions *per se* but the mode of recruitment which was then discussed in minute and particular detail by the T.D.L.A., the planters' representatives and the Council of the Secretary of State in London.

The exhaustive nineteenth century legislative reforms concerning the manner in which overseas labour was recruited, selected and transported, represented a direct challenge to the abundant supplies of labour relied upon by the Indian industrialists. The reason for such concern on the part of Mauritian planters was the need to control the quantity and quality of the labour available on estates, and is not wholly attributable to the 'benevolent neutrality' of the Indian state which some historians of indenture have sought to document.[53]

Insofar as living and working conditions of labourers on estates were concerned, there were few reforms in the first half of the nineteenth century in Mauritius and elsewhere, given the few alternative sources of employment available to immigrants and the prospect of unending supplies of new indentured workers. This situation only began to change at the turn of the century as plantations broke up and smallholding peasant cultivation became the norm, with the sugar companies acting as monopsonistic wholesalers of the product rather than being themselves the producers. As they stepped back from production, and in particular as the plantation colonies themselves became less profitable both to the capitalist and to the government, concern for the regulation of the industry then increased.

It was in a changed climate of opinion that the renewed attempts to import labour to Mauritius and to Assam in the 1920s thus met with opposition in India. In the Central Provinces the spirit of obstruction had become an established policy of government by 1927, in which year the Chief Commissioner responded to the enquiries of the Royal Commission on Indian Agriculture in the following terms:

> The conditions in this province are generally not favourable to the recruitment

[53] B. Mangru, *Benevolent Neutrality: Indian Government Policy and Labour Migration to British Guiana, 1854-1884* (Hansib, 1987).

of labour for the Assam tea gardens on account of the growing local demand for labour in consequence of the construction of large irrigation and other works by the P.W.D., the opening of new railways, the establishment of mills, factories and mines and the general improvement in the economic conditions of the people of the province and the consequent rise in wages.[54]

Coming less than a decade after a period of famine, in 1919-21, in which there were more migrants recruited in the C.P. for work in Assam than from anywhere else (a total in these two years of 648,646), this was clearly a viewpoint motivated more by policy than by the facts of the matter.

A few years before this, in 1913, the Chief Commissioner had similarly opined, 'speaking for the Central Provinces, it has to be plainly stated that the days of emigration to Assam are practically over, the local demand for labour is very intense and wages are rising'.[55] This comment came shortly after the massive migration accompanying the famines of 1897-1900 and only a few years before that of 1914, and serves to illustrate the consistency in official prejudice: a view carried into many other fields as well. On the subject of Public Employment Agencies, mooted by the International Labour Organisation in 1922, C.P. officials eloquently described the extent and willingness of local labourers to migrate to a variety of places within the province, insisting that there was no need for such an agency, particularly in connection with migration to Assam—an area in which the province was over supplied with recruiters in their view. The problem was rather, as they saw it, 'to restrict the movement of labour in times of scarcity to its usual fields and if possible divert it to other places where it is usually in demand' namely, the mines, farms and irrigation works within the province.[56]

If we are to interpret these comments and reports correctly the conditions of production of the colonial discourse on labour migration and the 'condition of labour' have to be seriously addressed. By simply reproducing colonialist accounts either for or against systems of production, as do the voluntarists and objectionists, historians all too

[54] BP C.I.D., 1924/11-3: Extension of operations for emigration to Mauritius; BP, Agriculture Dept., 1927/1a: Information supplied to Royal Commission.

[55] BP, C.I.D., 1913/9-3: Correspondence on the subject of recruitment of labour for the tea gardens in Assam.

[56] BP, C.I.D., 1922/36-7: Public employment agencies, views of M.V. Joshi, H.M. Revenue & Finance.



easily fall into the trap of becoming themselves crude advocates of one or other position, failing to notice that these accounts were produced for a purpose—usually that of justifying or rejecting a policy of legislative intervention by the colonialists themselves. To mistake such a discourse on labour for one *of* labour merely replicates the discourse itself.